

Safe & Sound
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Luke 5:1-11

I had always assumed that to be a fisherman in Jesus' time was to show up with a boat and a net. But it was more complicated than that. Like today, the fishing industry was highly regulated, and daily fishing licenses were purchased in advance. A night of empty nets and no fish, like Simon and his team had, wasn't just a disappointment, it was a disaster.

On most days, a decent haul of fish meant that Simon's family would eat that night and still have enough to trade for goods they needed. But a miraculous haul, like the one they experienced in today's reading, could feed them for months. In a few hours, Simon made enough to cover the cost of his license, pay his helpers AND keep his mother, wife, and children fed for a good long time.

His family had to be safe and sound in order for him to even consider following Jesus on the mission trip of a lifetime.

Many of you have heard that my sabbatical (which starts in eight days, but who's counting?) will be overseas, that I will be going to the middle-east, to Israel/Palestine, a place I've been before, to live in community for three months as an Ecumenical Accompanier.

I admit that I feel a little bit like Simon as I pack for what is, for me, a mission trip of a lifetime. I wake myself up at night with the most random thoughts, like, when's Zack's next dentist appointment? Or, what if Cady is having a hard time with a class and I'm not there to help? Or, what will they do if Clark misplaces the one set of keys we have for the Jeep? All I want is for them is to be safe and sound while I'm gone.

Which is ironic, because the number one question people have asked me is: "Pastor Jenn, will YOU be safe and sound?" Statistically, 100% of the 1,800 people from 27 countries that have participated in this program return to their hometowns without a major injury. Based on the math, my gut response is an enthusiastic YES, I'll be FINE!

My second response, the practical one, is this: Of course, I'll be safe. We follow safety protocols, we never go anywhere alone, we get to know the people living in our neighborhood very quickly and they become our friends. They know that we are there to help them be safe, so they look out for us.

My third answer, the emotional one, is this: Based on my experience of the last five years, I'm probably as safe in the West Bank as I am here. The truth is that sometimes really bad stuff happens, without warning, to really good people, for no good reason at all. What I am counting on, and what I've witnessed time and time again, is that when bad things happen, Jesus is there. Not to necessarily fix the situation, or fly into our lives like a superhero, but to be the lamp by which we set our next step, and the one after that.

Let me tell you a little bit about the program I am working with and the what I'll be doing as a volunteer EA. The World Council of Churches (WCC) developed the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel in 2002 in response to a call for an international protective presence made by the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem.

A group of about 40 of us will serve for three months before returning to our churches and communities. We are the 64th group that has served in the program. I am one of two Americans this term, and 80% of my funding came from a generous grant from Global Ministries, which is the international missionary arm of OCWM, Our Churches Wider Mission.¹

Ecumenical Accompaniers offer a protective presence to vulnerable communities, monitoring and reporting human rights abuses to the appropriate agencies. We join Palestinians and Israelis who work in nonviolent ways for peace, and we interact with a myriad of international, Israeli and Palestinian partners. When we return home, we share first-hand experiences to open the eyes of our communities, churches and governments to the realities of the situation. We believe a just peace is possible.

The work of EAPPI is coordinated with the International Committee of the Red Cross, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. We also work with UNICEF, the U.N. agency working for the protection of children, the non-governmental organization Save the Children and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

I will be stationed in the East Jerusalem placement. My team and I will monitor the **checkpoints** that surround Jerusalem, which restrict Palestinians from other parts of the West Bank from accessing the City. We will count how many people cross these checkpoints; how long it takes them to do so; and we will document any human rights violations that may occur.

¹ http://www.globalministries.org/short_term_volunteers

We specifically track **restrictions** on Palestinian access to employment, education, worship and healthcare within Jerusalem. We also monitor access to worship within the Old City, in particular the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during Holy Week and Easter, and the Al Aqsa Mosque on Fridays.

My team also will serve as **hosts** to any international humanitarian agencies that happen to visit during our time, giving them up-to-date information about the peace movement in Jerusalem.

EA's also respond to alerts of family **evictions** and house demolitions to document and report these incidents to relevant agencies, and offer compassion to the families. We monitor the **displacement** of Palestinian communities in Jerusalem's periphery, and we visit with the families in the refugee camps. We walk **children** from their home to school and back in order to reduce the possibility of verbal or physical harassment from soldiers and settlers.

Our **protective presence** makes the cost of human rights abuses more apparent to the perpetrators, it persuades them to act differently, and studies have shown that it helps deter future attacks on civilians. When our presence does not deter human rights violations, we are there to monitor and report these abuses to the United Nations and other human rights agencies.

We are not pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian and we **do not take sides** in the conflict. We are pro-human rights and pro-international humanitarian law. We do not discriminate against anyone and we stand faithfully with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. We stand with local Israeli and Palestinian peace and human rights groups, helping focus global attention on their activities, which increases their credibility and capacity to work for reform.

We **share eyewitness testimonies** with faith leaders, decision makers, media, civil society, and business officials, so that they change public policy for the common good. Increased international awareness puts pressure on the perpetrators of human rights abuses and helps protect civilians. So when I return home, I will do so by way of Washington DC. I'll spend a few days debriefing with Church World Service, then knocking on doors of legislators to advocate for a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine.

Advocacy is an essential component of accompaniment. It reflects our call to accompany our sisters and brothers who struggle for justice and peace and whose voices are seldom heard. In this way, we bear one another's burdens and affirm that all are created in the image of God.

We believe **nonviolence** is the only way to a true and lasting solution to any conflict. We reject the use of violence and seek to bring change through the engagement of individuals and groups with peaceful dialogue. Our actions are nonviolent and we support all people working nonviolently for peace in Israel and Palestine.

I know there are more relaxing ways a pastor might engage in sabbatical. In fact, my PRC can tell you that I've been down many different planning roads. I could go to Silver Lake and stay in a cottage and write the first draft of a book. I could walk part of the Camino in Spain, interacting with other tourists. I could spend some time in Assisi, Italy touring the various spots where St. Francis and St. Clare lived with one of my favorite feminist theologians.

But these three months returning to Jerusalem, not as a tourist, but as a short-term missionary, is what I believe I am called now to do.

God calls each one of us. Here in Luke, Jesus calls his disciples by coming to the place where they work as fishermen and getting into Simon's boat. After Jesus finished speaking to the crowd, he decided to stay to get to know these men. Eventually Jesus suggests they push out put their net down in deeper waters.

Peter was skeptical; he knew the territory and they had not caught anything all night, but he did it anyway. To his astonishment, his nets filled so fast he needed an extra boat and more men to haul it all in. Jesus didn't really call the disciples to change jobs, they remained fishermen all their lives. He just called them to BE different in the jobs they had already chosen.

We all try, in various ways, to respond to God's great love. Sometimes we have felt like Simon; that we have fished all night and caught nothing. Regardless of what our individual failures have been, Jesus calls us to set our fear aside, to consider the impact that his love can have in the lives of those around us, and to enter the surf for yet another go at it... **whatever that may mean in our individual walk with Christ.**

The opportunity to return to the holy land, to engage in this important work, to serve oppressed and hurting people on YOUR behalf is a blessing, one that I have not taken lightly. I know that I'll have opportunities on my days off to travel within the area, visiting the places and people that made such an impact on me five years ago. And I expect to return to you safe and sound, with a new perspective on what it means to follow the One who calls us all.

In the meantime, I hope that you will continue the important work that we've done together in this community, that you will pray as hard for me and I'll be praying for you, and that you'll love each other as Christ surely loves us all. Amen.